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SUBJECT: AMBASSADOR'S MARCH 17 LUNCH WITH FORMER PM GOH KUN

Classified By: Amb. Alexander Vershbow. Reasons 1.4 (b/d).

¶1. (C) SUMMARY: Former Prime Minister Goh Kun, a leading presidential contender, expressed to the Ambassador March 17 his deep concern about the apparent lack of communication between Washington and Seoul. He pressed for the ROK's inclusion in the Visa Waiver Program and expressed confidence about progress on USFK's relocation to Pyongtaek. On North Korea, Goh worried that North Korea would drag out the Six Party Talks, in the meantime observing Iran as a possible model for allowing the DPRK to retain nuclear weapons. Turning to domestic politics, Goh predicted defeat for Uri in the May 31 regional elections. END SUMMARY.

U.S.-ROK RELATIONS

¶2. (C) The Ambassador expressed appreciation for the former prime minister's years of service in national office, especially his steady management of the U.S.-ROK relationship during his tenure as acting president in spring 2004, when President Roh was under impeachment. Touching on Goh's meeting then with visiting Vice President Cheney, the Ambassador observed that all the bilateral issues that the two had discussed at that time, except the resumption of U.S. beef imports, had found satisfactory solutions.

¶3. (C) Goh agreed that Seoul and Washington had made good progress on the bulk of bilateral issues discussed in April 2004 -- USFK realignment, Yongsan relocation, the New Embassy Compound -- and expressed hope that the beef issue, too, would be solved soon. Goh turned to the launch of FTA talks, calling it a sign of good progress in U.S.-ROK relations. He also credited the Vice President's visit with helping to ensure stability in the ROK at a time of political difficulty.

¶4. (C) Recalling the achievements of the bilateral relationship in recent years, Goh said the state of the official relationship appeared to be "good." Nevertheless, he continued, the alliance did seem more frayed than in the past and gaps between the two allies had become exaggerated due to poor public diplomacy on the part of the ROKG and poor communication between Washington and Seoul. For example, in 2005, the Ministry of National Defense had issued a white paper in which it had dropped its traditional reference to the DPRK as the ROK's "main enemy." At the same time, however, the white paper had specifically listed the three threats to the ROK posed by the DPRK, i.e., conventional forces, forward-deployed artillery, and nuclear weapons and

other WMD. The ROKG, Goh said, should have done a better job of clarifying that it was dropping the "main enemy" label in keeping with modern practice throughout the rest of the world, but that the ROK remained no less alert to the continuing serious threat posed by the DPRK.

15. (C) The lack of communication between Washington and Seoul was even more unfortunate given the fundamental shifts that were taking place in both the United States and the ROK, Goh said. Just as Washington was changing its global strategy for the post-9/11 era, the ROK was seeing dramatic domestic changes. The bilateral relationship, too, was in a period of transition, making it all the more crucial for the two sides to communicate well.

16. (C) On other bilateral issues, Goh underscored that the ROK's inclusion in the Visa Waiver Program would be critical to the shaping of Korean public opinion about the United States. He also expressed confidence in the ROKG's plan for relocating USFK Command to Pyongtaek. There were some sporadic, albeit highly publicized, demonstrations, but the relocation was "fundamentally not a big problem," Goh said.

NORTH KOREA

17. (C) Goh stated that most South Koreans recognized that the U.S.-ROK alliance had been essential to their country's economic and political development over the past 50 years. Moreover, the alliance would be sustained and enhanced in the future on the basis of the growing shared values and common interests between the two countries. However, the ROK's emergence as a democracy with a prosperous market economy was being accompanied by changing attitudes among Korean youth. The younger generation, which had grown up comfortable and confident, were calling for greater Korean "independence," often defined in terms of opposition to the United States. This phenomenon was not unique to the ROK, Goh observed, but it was intensified by the longing for the two Koreas to be reunified, and to act as one people. Ironically, the United States, more than China or Japan, was best positioned to provide the support necessary for reunification, inclusive of maintaining a military presence on the Peninsula to ensure stability post-reunification.

18. (C) The Ambassador stressed that the United States supported the goal of reunification on the Korean Peninsula and wanted to contribute its strength and influence toward that goal. Washington and Seoul might sometimes differ in our respective tactics for dealing with North Korea, but the two agreed that it was in our interest, and that of the North Koreans, to open up the DPRK. It would help if we could convince China that it was in its interest as well.

110. (C) Turning to U.S. action on North Korea's illicit activities, the Ambassador reiterated that these measures were defensive in nature and not subject to negotiation. That said, we remained committed to the Six Party Talks and saw it as a vehicle not only to achieve denuclearization but also for addressing the range of issues related to North's entry into the international community, including negotiating a peace regime, normalizing U.S.-DPRK ties, and economic development. We were thus frustrated by Pyongyang's refusal to return to the talks, the Ambassador said.

111. (C) Goh expressed concern that even if the Six Party Talks were to resume, the nuclear situation would have become more complicated, requiring much more time to solve. He assessed that Pyongyang was stalling for time while it watched the Iran situation closely to see if it might offer a model that would allow the DPRK to retain nuclear weapons. Goh recommended that when the Six Party Talks resumed, the parties should have a roadmap that clearly laid out benefits for each action. The Ambassador responded that Washington agreed in principle, but that Pyongyang must be prepared to act, not just declare. He agreed with Goh that the DPRK's decision to continue to reprocess plutonium after the September 19 agreement had worsened the situation.

¶12. (C) Responding to Goh's query, the Ambassador stated that the U.S. briefing for Li Gun in New York had been useful. Li had proposed the establishment of a bilateral working group to address the illicit financial activities issue, but we had demurred, as our defensive measure were not subject to negotiation, and we did not want to allow a diversion of attention from the Six Party Talks to possible bilateral talks.

DOMESTIC POLITICS

¶13. (C) Goh predicted that the Uri Party would be defeated in the May 31 regional elections. The ruling party had sustained significant damage that could not be undone in the short time left. Goh added that Uri was at a further disadvantage because regionalism remained strong, making it difficult for the non-regionally-based Uri Party to challenge the other parties whose roots are firmly planted in their respective regions.

COMMENT

¶14. (C) A moderate independent, former PM Goh Kun is among the top three contenders for the 2007 presidential election. He led the polls throughout 2005, but has now slipped to second or third, behind Lee Myung-bak and Park Geun-hye. Goh's popularity derives from his strong performance as acting president during the 2004 impeachment crisis, his breadth of experience as a life-long public servant, and his image as a clean, cautious, and stable "adult" politician. At the same time, political observers say these same traits have prevented Goh from establishing himself as a political power in his own right. Indeed, although he has served six presidents at the highest levels, he does not appear to have developed any particular personal or political ties to any of these leaders or their parties.

¶15. (C) Buoyed by popular support but without a political machine to call his own, Goh appears to be encouraging the established parties to "persuade" him to be their candidate. This strategy is working to some extent, as the Uri Party, Grand National Party (GNP), Democratic Party (DP), and the People Centered Party (PCP) have each approached Goh about the possibility of him either joining the party or forming an alliance. Thus far, Goh has responded coyly, declaiming publicly that he is not interested in any of his suitors, while allowing associates to stoke rumors of possible deals. He told the Ambassador he was considering forming his own party, but he is likely to fare better in alliance with one of the existing parties.

¶16. (C) During his tenure as prime minister, Goh oversaw the initiation of a number of interagency processes related to bilateral issues, including Pyongtaek relocation, the New Embassy Compound, and the beef issue. His comments to the Ambassador showed his continuing interest in and grasp of the details of these issues. END COMMENT.

VERSHBOW